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Statement submitted by Misión Mujer, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Ten recommendations to enhance public policies on and investment in risk prevention among adolescents

Adolescence, one of life's most complex and most fascinating stages, is typically a period of change, vulnerability and opportunity. Physical and emotional changes; the quest for independence and identity; the formation of relationships beyond the nuclear family; the beginnings of awareness and experience of sexuality; and concern about readiness for employment — all these take place during this phase. The adolescent (between the ages of 12 and 19) makes a clean break with the security, behaviours and values of childhood and starts to build for him or herself a new world that is his or her own. In order to do so, the adolescent still needs support: from the family, from school and from society, since adolescence remains a learning phase.

We define adolescents as women and men with specific needs, which must be addressed in order to produce human capital that can be transformed in a positive way at the personal, family, community and country levels, bringing about sustainable economic development and a commitment to society and values in order to transform the environment. However, given that adolescence constitutes the intermediate stage between childhood and youth, there is a dearth of specific policies aimed exclusively at adolescence.

The protection of the human rights of adolescents is in line with respect for their dignity as persons and their ability to participate in improving their society. The evidence provided by social research indicates that there is an important link between access to health care and education and economic growth in a country. Investing in human capital to improve access to preventive health care, and educational coverage and quality lead to a more capable and productive adolescent population with greater potential for economic and social development. This type of action reduces the social cost of palliative measures (social rehabilitation centres, costs related to maternal and child health and addictions and low productivity, among others), in addition to reducing poverty and inequality.

Against this backdrop, Misión Mujer proposes 10 recommendations for enhancing public policies and investment in risk prevention among adolescents:

- Introduce a positive image of adolescents, derived from the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that recognizes them as persons with dignity that constitute the human capital of a country. Replace the perception of adolescence as synonymous with antisocial and psychological pathology with one that embraces, supports and motivates the adolescent, encouraging successful experiences in which they are the key actors.
- Promote and support adolescents in developing a life plan in line with their aspirations, needs and environment, offering them opportunities for study, health care, job training and cultural and social development that allow them to enhance their quality of life and shared responsibility in society.
- Acknowledge the importance of adolescent participation in various processes, involving them in the design, follow-up, implementation and evaluation of public policies that concern them, promote their empowerment through

committed participation in activities aimed at ecological conservation, social progress, legal decisions that concern them, democratic participation in the country, in academic life through student councils and assemblies, cultural and sporting activities and in civil society and volunteer organizations.

- Promote freedom with responsibility in a way that recognizes adolescence as a process of ascent through interdependence and autonomy, encouraging adolescents to use their freedom responsibly, making them aware of the consequences of their actions and committing themselves to respect the freedom of others.

- Prioritize the creation and operation of psychosocial risk-prevention programmes for adolescents based on life skills. The World Health Organization itself suggests that such programmes can help promote health and self-care, prevent psychosocial problems (violence, addictions, early sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy, among others). These programmes also favour adolescent participation in society, their inclusion in the community and the quest to achieve quality education and sustainable human development.

- Promote support for the family and school as necessary forums for the protection and development of adolescents. Several studies on the factors that protect at-risk adolescents from early sex, violence and drug abuse show that adolescents who come from broken homes are more vulnerable to these risks, hence the urgent need to promote actions to strengthen the family as one of those factors. School also provides an ideal opportunity to protect and gain leverage with adolescents; it empowers the student to know, understand and better himself, and to possess the skills needed to enter the workforce in the near future.

- Include not only professionals and resources but also persons closely involved with the comprehensive development and socialization of youth in every community in the process of determining public policies and coordinating efforts aimed at adolescents. A key element in increasing the effectiveness of these programmes is the activation of networks for the protection of adolescents, in which families, schools, civil society organizations, businesses, authorities and anyone who is in any way involved with adolescents collaborate on a joint project in order to reduce the risk factors that affect the adolescents in a given community.

- Plan strategies to protect the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents, where the chief recommendation would be to encourage delaying the start of sexual relations, given that sexual contact is considered risk behaviour for this age group by public health authorities (recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States of America and WHO), as condoms reduce but do not eliminate the risk of contracting infections. On this subject, it is important to conduct additional research and raise awareness about the sexualization of adolescent women and men in their social context, which has harmful emotional and psychological effects, leads to diminished cognitive abilities and educational performance, harms the development of healthy relationships and incites violence, in particular violence against women, in addition to reinforcing stereotypes that result in low self-esteem and depression, among other conditions.

- Pay special attention to the issue of adolescent mental health, given that there is presently great demand for a forum (such as that provided by the Axios programme) where adolescents can be heard and receive psychological care and, in the event that a serious problem is detected, a referral to the relevant entity. Few such services are available; it is thus important to invest in the revitalization or establishment, as necessary, of child psychology offices in every school at the municipal, state and national level with the goal of increasing coverage of the population.

- Allocate substantial resources for the promotion, construction and maintenance of sports, cultural, artistic, recreational or workshop-based activities, with self-sustaining models at moderate feeds or free of charge in order to promote participation in those activities and thereby effectively reduce psychosocial risk among adolescents.